THE FOUNDING FATHERS ON THE EDUCATION OF WOMEN

THEORIES concerning the education of women in America underwent considerable change during the period from 1760 to 1810. While gains during the period for the educational emancipation of women are few in comparison with the great progress which was made after 1810, the preliminary breaking of static inertia and bitter opposition to the advancement of educational opportunities for women should not be minimized.

Those who opposed improving women's education did so for various reasons. Most Americans held one of the older views at the beginning of the period, and while only a small minority had become outright champions of equal educational opportunities for women by 1810, many others had liberalized their views to some extent. Traditional views of the place and role of women in society varied with different individuals and with different localities, but all these views assigned to women a status which required little formal schooling. One belief was that higher education would rob women of their feminine qualities, thus rendering them mannish. Since custom had prohibited higher education for women, people were not accustomed to their having that accomplishment, and consequently did not know what an educated woman of taste and culture would be like. Strengthening arguments were to be found in the persons of unattractive, militant women who defied social custom in order to obtain a superficial education, and then assumed masculine behavior and dressed in ridiculous mannish costumes.

While some individuals went so far as to maintain that

the female mind is not capable of mastering studies which were traditionally assigned to men, others said only that higher education is not in keeping with the role of women in society. But regardless of which view these opponents held, there was usually the contention, or at least the intimation, that woman's place in society is below that of man.

The movement toward higher education for women in schools scarcely made a beginning in the United States before 1810, and few writers on education had anything to say on the subject. Something was said, however; and although the references to women's education were limited, one can discern in them the stirrings which were to lead to the development of excellent seminaries and colleges for girls in this country.

Two of the greatest liberals among our founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, though advanced in their thinking for the day, had nothing to say of women's education that was revolutionary. Jefferson exhibited delicacy, devotion, and exacting care concerning the education of his daughters, but his recommendations for the education of girls are restricted to his personal correspondence concerning his daughters and grandchildren. Most of Franklin's remarks on the subject of women's education are also to be found in his personal correspondence and are concerned with the education of his daughter.

Benjamin Rush, one of the few who held revolutionary views on the subject, declared that many men opposed the education of women in order to keep them in a subordinate, subjugated position.

> I have sometimes been led to ascribe the invention of ridiculous and expensive fashions in female dress, entirely to the gentlemen, in order to divert the ladies from improving their minds, and thereby to secure a more arbitrary and unlimited authority over them.[1]

John Trumbull, in Part III of *Progress of Dulness*, satirized "without malevolence" the inferior position which many individuals traditionally ascribed to women. According to prevailing customs, he complained, the girls were more valued for beauty and gaiety than for education and wisdom. These customs which deprived women of opportunities for education were so deeply rooted that the formal schooling which girls could receive was next to nothing, he complained. In some respects, it was worse than no education at all, for it instilled ideas which did the girls more harm than good. He maintained (1) that women are different from men, but make a collective contribution different in kind but not inferior to that of men; and (2) that women should receive an intellectual education equal to that of men and adapted to their own interests.[2]

Gradually, there was developing a realization of the need for the education of women. This Revolutionary creed was based on the political principle that all citizens of the new republic should have equal rights regarding life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. While the need for the educational emancipation of American women had not been generally recognized by the founding fathers, they did form a democratic government which was to serve as the foundation for a gradual emancipation.

During the lifetime of the founding fathers, there was a growing insistence on the part of some men and women that women be granted a more equal place in society than previous customs had permitted. These leaders declared that woman's "pursuit of happiness" included a measure of educational emancipation; and Americans, at various times and in varying degrees, slowly and progressively embraced the concept. Surprisingly enough, the male members of our

ancestry were not entirely responsible for retarding the educational emancipation of women, since many impediments were imposed and maintained by women who held the older views.

While in some respects Jefferson was conservative in his views concerning the role of women in society, his proposed educational bills for the state of Virginia were very liberal concerning the elementary education of girls. His bill of 1779 marked him as one of the pioneers of universal, tax-supported education for girls at the elementary level:

> Section VI. At every one of those schools shall be taught reading, writing, and common arithmetick, and the books which shall be used therein for instructing the children to read shall be such as will at the same time make them acquainted with Graecian, Roman, English, and American history. At these schools all the free children, male and female, resident within the respective hundred, shall be entitled to receive tuition gratis, for the term of three years, and as much longer, at their private expense, as their parents, guardians, or friends shall think proper.[3]

Thus, girls would be permitted to attend this type of school for several years by paying tuition after the third year. The courses which Jefferson prescribed for the proposed schools could be pursued to a virtually secondary academic level. The bill, however, was defeated.

There were a few Americans of the period who wrote straightforwardly and at length on the subject of higher education for women, although they also expected women to make careers of being wives and mothers. One of the early proponents of this view was Benjamin Rush, who, in 1787, stated the idea very strongly for that early date:

> A philosopher once said "let me make all the ballads of a country and I care not who makes its laws." He might with more propriety have said, let the ladies of a country be educated properly, and they will not only make and administer

> its laws, but form its manners and character. It would require a lively imagination to describe, or even to comprehend the happiness of a country where knowledge and virtue were generally diffused among the female sex.[4]

He further declared that the opponents of an improved education for women were unimaginative and intolerant:

> I know that the elevation of the female mind, by means of moral, physical and religious truth, is considered by some men as unfriendly to the domestic character of woman. But this is the prejudice of little minds, and springs from the same spirit which opposes the general diffusion of knowledge among the citizens of our republic. If men believe that ignorance is favourable to the government of the female sex, they are certainly deceived; for a weak and ignorant woman will always be governed with the greatest difficulty.[5]

Americans of early colonial times generally recognized that the absence of vice in women was a good influence upon men, and the idea was extended into the early national period. If the absence of vice in women was a good influence upon men, some leaders reasoned, then the education of women should afford further benefits and should enhance the influence which discreet behavior produced. Noah Webster contributed his support on this point:

> A man who is attached to *good* company, seldom frequents that which is bad. For this reason, society requires that females should be well educated, and extend their influences as far as possible over the other sex.[6]

In 1794, *Vindication of the Rights of Women,* by Mary Wollstonecraft, a British champion of women's rights, was published in America. This militant demand for the emancipation of women had appeared in England two years earlier. Miss Wollstonecraft, later Mrs. Thomas Godwin, both appealed for and demanded an improved status and education for women. She urged women and reasonable men to join in a militant campaign to correct improper ideas about the

status of women, declaring that women were being subjected to a "false system of education, gathered from books written on the subject by men." Rousseau, Lord Chesterfield, and others, she contended, had "contributed to render women more artificial, weaker creatures, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more useless members of society."[7]

Many Americans—both those who opposed Mary Wollstonecraft's theories as well as those who agreed with them—read and discussed her plea for the emancipation of woman from the degraded status which custom had accorded her. She appealed to men to liberalize their attitudes toward women and to "let them be taught to respect themselves as rational creatures." Her charge that men "have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than rational wives" had been stated previously by Trumbull and by others, but an appeal from an educated young woman strengthened the idea. Her own educational achievements furnished evidence of possibilities which could be realized, and her plea that girls and women were held in bondage appealed to the spirit of chivalry.[8]

Gradually Americans were beginning to renounce the traditional theory that girls cannot understand and learn the difficult subject matter of higher education. By 1810, many examples had demonstrated that girls could master subjects which heretofore had been considered exclusively suitable to the capacities of male students. Even though girls were not admitted to the same instruction as boys, many took advantage of the service of private tutors and of private academies and seminaries, and, in this manner, mastered Greek, Latin, higher mathematics, and the other subjects of the traditional curriculum.

The only higher education open to women during the period 1760-1810 and for long afterward was that directed by private tutors or given in academies and seminaries, but the achievements of more and more girls was sounding the death-knell of the outmoded theory that the female mind cannot comprehend the same subjects which boys learn. Girls were mastering French and music in the curriculum of "accomplishments," and later, Greek, Latin, mathematics, and other subjects. Long before 1810, people were awakening to the fact that anyone who can learn French can learn Greek, Latin, mathematics, and other subjects.

Rush was quite specific in his recommendations for a distinctively American education for women, insisting that the education of the women of any country should be suited to the government and customs of that country. Since he considered the government and society of the new nation to be quite different from that of Great Britain, he recommended a mode of education different from that which existed for British women.[9]

Trumbull contended that American women should be educated to become rational individuals who assume roles of usefulness throughout their lives. He presented his argument by picturing the unwholesome features of the product of the "ancient rule," which caused girls to be alluring but shallow. Under this system, he declared, women feel that life holds little for them after the brief span of the few years during which they are young and charming.[10]

There was a growing realization of still another advantage to be gained from educating women—mothers could train their children and manage the home more intelligently.

The personal correspondence of people of this period contains many references to the role of mothers and indicates

the importance which was generally placed on this function. In letters to his wife, Franklin expressed his concern over the training of their daughter and the importance which he attributed to the mother's role in the education and training of the child. Thus

> I hope my dear Sally will behave in everything to your satisfaction, and mind her learning and improvement. As my Absence will make your House quieter, and lessen your Business, you will have more leisure to instruct her and form her. I pray God to bless you both, and that we may once more have a happy meeting. God preserve, guard and guide you.[11]

Franklin expected all individuals to participate in useful work of some type. There was no place for idle mistresses or largely decorative women in his theory of industry, frugality, and general virtue. He recommended the study of arithmetic, bookkeeping, and the writing of business letters for the girl, so that she would be able to take her place as her husband's business partner. Franklin was quite wealthy when he recommended that his daughter work in her husband's business firm. He recommended such work for women not only as a means of providing for themselves, for example in the case of widows, but chose that course for his wife and his daughter under financial conditions which would not have required it of either of them.[12]

Jefferson also made many references to the role of mothers in the training of their children, and counseled his young daughter to accept the instruction of her governess as that of a mother, since her own mother was dead. Further, his evaluation of his daughter's superior ability in the role of the mother-teacher of her sons and daughters indicates his high regard for the value of American mothers in that capacity:

> My surviving daughter accordingly, the mother of many daughters as well as sons, has made their education the object of her life, and being a better judge of the practical part than myself, it is with her aid and that of one of her *élèves*, that I shall subjoin a catalogue of books for such a course of reading as we have practiced.[13]

In this letter, he included a reading list for a course of study for girls, as well as his most extensive general advice on the education of girls that has yet been published.

At this time, however, fathers generally professed little interest in the training of their daughters beyond the requirement that the mothers teach them to be modest, morally discreet, and, in most families, good workers. Daughters and younger sons were usually considered to be almost entirely under their mothers' jurisdiction.

Rush contended that the education of women should be extensive and that they should be able to instruct their sons as well as their daughters. He did not favor restricting their sons' instruction to rudimentary academic subjects and moral principles. Also, mothers should be able to assist in giving their sons proper training in the principles of liberty and government. Since few professional servants ever emigrated to America for the purpose of continuing their profession, American women who were financially able to afford servants should be trained for supervising them, Rush declared. Women, in other words, should be able to assume most of the duties of the management of the household:

> They must be stewarts, and guardians of their husbands' property. That education, therefore, will be most proper for our women, which teaches them to discharge the duties of those offices with the most success and reputation.[14]

Such evolving theories about women's education presented many problems as to the type of training most suitable for various individuals and families. The practical busi-

ness training which Jefferson, Franklin, Rush, and others recommended was but one of three general types of education from which families might choose. The other two were solid academic studies and the development of polite accomplishments. Daughters in families which had many slaves or servants might pursue all three types, but in most families the time and energy that a girl could devote to education were limited.

The most popular of the solid subjects were reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, history, and geography, and at the more advanced academic levels, Latin, Greek, higher mathematics, and classical literature. The most popular of the polite accomplishments were instruction in dancing, elegant speech and manners, fancy needlework and related arts, and vocal and instrumental music. Often a superficial knowledge of French was listed as an accomplishment, the girl learning only enough of the language to enable her to write a love-note.

The prevailing theory among the proponents of a solid academic education for women was that a proper balance between accomplishments and solid subjects should be carefully maintained. Jefferson, for example, recommended both types. He advised a mastery of the French language for academic purposes, and the study of some of the works of Molière, Racine, Corneille, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, and James Thomson. But he also recommended some of the accomplishments: "The ornaments too, and the amusements of life, are entitled to their portion of attention."[15]

According to Jefferson, the chief activities of the polite accomplishments for girls were dancing, drawing, and music. He recommended dancing for health, gracefulness, and social efficiency, but, according to the conservative French custom,

he did not approve of dancing for married women. Drawing, though still not valued as highly in America as in Europe, could furnish innocent amusement and be an aid to the mother in instructing her young children. Music, which was valued above drawing and dancing, was to be studied by those who had an aptitude for it. Music, he felt, furnishes a delightful recreation which can be enjoyed throughout life.[16]

Trumbull held similar views, criticizing the preoccupation of women with accomplishments to the exclusion of solid subjects. But in spite of the satire which he heaped upon women's frivolous interests in *Progress of Dulness,* he still believed that there should be instruction in the polite accomplishments:

> But dress and dancing are to women,
> Their education's mint and cummin;
> These lighter graces should be taught,
> And weightier matters not forgot.[17]

He also attacked the superficial nature of most of the accomplishments, complaining that a great number of girls wasted many months at "tawdry embroid'ry" and similar frivolities, as if they constituted a balanced curriculum. Many girls of limited culture took a few short lessons from private teachers in an effort to acquire culture, genteel manners, and sophistication quickly. Such practice was ridiculous, Trumbull declared, because the result was a small amount of limited imitation:

> This springs from want of just discerning,
> As pedantry from want of learning;
> And proves this maxim true to sight
> The half-genteel are least polite.[18]

While Rush placed greater importance on solid subjects than on the ornamental, he too did not exclude the latter:

"In particular it is incumbent upon us to make ornamental accomplishments yield to principles and knowledge, in the education of our women."[19] The text of his entire essay, *Thoughts upon Female Education,* indicates, however, that although he desired a "proper" balance between accomplishments and solid subjects, the academic subjects should receive the greater stress. For girls, he recommended the study of history, biographies, geography, travel-books, astronomy, natural philosophy, and chemistry. The last three subjects on his list were designed to eliminate superstitions and correct misinformation about the activities of everyday life. He valued the reading of moral essays, poetry, and Biblical selections, and deplored the recent banning of the use of the Bible in certain schools.[20]

As for the accomplishments, Rush suggested the study of vocal music for all girls, and training in instrumental music only for students of great aptitude, since the time and expense required for the development of proficiency in instrumental music made inadvisable the general study of it in a new country. In regard to dancing, he felt that it was "by no means an improper branch of education for an American lady."[21] Dancing held positive advantages, for it would improve a girl's health and gracefulness.

The chief objections to polite accomplishments then were that they often dominated a girl's education and thus eliminated solid studies, that an excess of accomplishments often made girls vain, and that a superficial acquisition of accomplishments often led to a ridiculous, affected elegance. Since the development of culture and of genteel manners usually required a long association with cultured people, girls who were reared in cultured homes were usually the only ones who developed those qualities to a high degree.

Meanwhile, in some cases, fathers, husbands, families, and friends were exercising a personal influence on the education of young women. Sometimes this influence was quite pronounced and direct, as for example the case of the careful father who would consent to teach his daughter Latin or geometry in order to keep her from going to dancing school, where she would learn French and dancing. His chief objection was not to dancing, but to the fact that these schools were often considered disreputable.

Although men seldom mentioned their intellectual associations with women and girls, a few records of such relationships have been preserved. The letters of Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams, reveal that she considered her husband liberal in his views on the intellectual advancement of women, so that it may be assumed that he had an important influence on her intellectual advancement. As she wrote him in 1778, while he was a member of the Continential Congress,

> But, in this country, you need not be told how much female education is neglected, nor how fashionable it has been to ridicule female learning: though I acknowledge it my happiness to be connected with a person of more generous and liberal sentiments.[22]

Others of our founding fathers exercised similar intellectual influence on their daughters and wives. Yet no state or national legislation regarding women's education was enacted during the early national period, except for land-grants to girls' academies and seminaries, since the foundations for the emancipation of women were only now being laid through the slow liberalizing of people's views on the matter.

Gradually, then, more and more girls who possessed social graces and feminine qualities were obtaining an education

in private academies and seminaries and from private tutors and family relationships, thereby demonstrating to American society the serious fallacy of arguments opposing women's education. By 1810, a number of cultured girls had received some higher education, thus demonstrating that a young woman's intellect and higher education were not incompatible.

Of course, many leaders of the "emancipation generation" of the mid-nineteenth century received their education and experienced significant intellectual associations during the early years of the new century. Emma Hart Willard's father and friends had long discussions with her about politics, education, and a liberal approach to religion. In 1810, she was twenty-two years of age and had already taught a summer term in a village school. At this time, Mary Lyon, who was to found Mount Holyoke Seminary (now College), was thirteen.

By 1810, many girls had profited from intellectual associations with liberal fathers, grandfathers, husbands, brothers, and friends, and some had been educated in excellent academies and seminaries by such noted educators as Joseph Emerson and John Poor. The graduates of these institutions left with the intention of always conducting themselves in a manner that would help to win the debate for the educational emancipation of women. As Benjamin Rush told the Academy graduating class at the commencement exercises in Philadelphia in 1787,

> But the reputation of the academy must be suspended, till the public are convinced, by the future conduct and character of our pupils, of the advantages of the institution. To you, therefore, YOUNG LADIES, an important problem is committed for solution; and that is whether our present plan of education be a wise one, and whether it be calculated to prepare you for the duties of social and domestic life.[23]

Increasing numbers of graduates went out from ever-improving girls' academies and seminaries with this type of challenge, seeking to convince the American public of the justification for the educational emancipation of women. And it was not long until that emancipation took place.

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NOTES

1. Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts upon Female Education," 1787, in *Essays: Literary, Moral and Philospohical* (Philadelphia: Thomas and Samuel F. Bradford, 1798), p. 92.
2. John Trumbull, *Progress of Dulness* (Part III, "The Adventures of Miss Harriet Simper"), 1773; in *The Poetical Works,* 2 vols. (Hartford: Samuel G. Goodrich, 1820), II, 62.
3. Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," 1779, in Paul L. Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson,* 10 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1892-1899), II, 223.
4. Rush, *op. cit.,* pp. 87-88.
5. *Ibid.,* pp. 92-93.
6. Noah Webster, "On the Education of Youth in America," 1788, in *A Collection of Essays and Fugitive Writings, on Moral, Historical, Political and Literary Subjects* (Boston: I. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, 1790), p. 27.
7. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Philadelphia: M. Carey, 1794), pp. 6, 22.
8. *Ibid.,* pp. 6-7, 22.
9. Rush, *op. cit.,* p. 75.
10. Trumbull, *op. cit.,* p. 86.
11. Benjamin Franklin, letter to Mrs. Deborah Franklin, June 2, 1757, in Albert Henry Smyth, ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin,* 10 vols. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905-1907), III, 405.
12. Benjamin Franklin, letter to Mrs. Sarah Bache, Jan. 29 1772, *op. cit.,* V, 376-377.
13. Thomas Jefferson, letter to Nathaniel Burwell, March 14, 1818, in Albert Bergh, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson,* 20 vols. (Washington: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907), XV, 166.
14. Rush, *op. cit.,* p. 76.

15. Thomas Jefferson, letter to Nathaniel Burwell, March 14, 1818, *op. cit.*, XV, p. 167.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 167-168.
17. Trumbull, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
19. Rush, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 79-82.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
22. Abigail Adams, letter to John Adams, June 30, 1788, in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Letters of Mrs. Adams, the Wife of John Adams* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1841), p. 131.
23. Rush, *op. cit.*, p. 91.